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ABSTRACT

Accountability in occupational education is considered in a three stage discussion. First, the use of the terms "occupational education programs," "higher education" and "accountability" are clarified. Second, progress made by higher education accrediting commissions in relating their activities to occupational education programs and institutions engaged in such efforts is described. Third, major issues in occupational education efforts, particularly within the community college context are considered. (Author/AL)

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ACCOUNTABILITY IN OCCUPATIONAL EDUCATION*

Introduction

Accountability is currently a dominant watchword in American education. Occupational education is also a term which is of vital and growing importance to American society. An attempt at synthesizing these two variously interpreted concepts represents our topic for consideration this morning.

It is noteworthy that educators, such as those represented here today, are seriously involved in discussing the positive potential of the current requests for accountability in education. It is also significant that you, as community college educators, are continuing and expanding your concern for the development and maintenance of quality in the dynamic area of occupational education. You are certainly joined in these interests by numerous other individuals and agencies including the six regional or institutional accrediting associations and their constituent commissions, particularly those involved with institutions of higher education.

Drawing upon the experiential base of the broad involvement of the higher education accrediting commission with institutions offering occupational education, I hope to contribute information and stimulation for your discussion of this important topic. For purposes of clarity, it would appear helpful to divide our discussion into three interrelated areas:

1. clarification of my use of the terms "occupational education programs," "higher education" and "accountability,"

*Presentation by Robert C. Bartlett, Assistant Executive Secretary for the North Central Association, to the Northwest Junior College Association Meeting held in Reno, Nevada, on December 6, 1971.

2. brief description of the progress made by higher education accrediting commissions in relating their activities to occupational education programs and institutions engaged in such efforts, and
3. consideration of what appear to be major issues in occupational education efforts, particularly within the community college context.

Definition of Concepts

Recognizing the problems which confusion over semantics can create, it should first be understood that "occupational education programs" refers to "a sequence of educational and skill development experiences designed to prepare an individual for entry, promotion, or updating in a specific occupation or cluster of occupations of less than professional level in business, trade and industry, health, home economics, agriculture and other special areas. The programs are normally two-years or less in duration and lead to an associate degree, diploma, or certificate and immediate employment." An implication of this definition, the importance of which I will make clear later in this presentation, is that the full comprehensive range of occupational education programs, and not just the highly technical ones, are included in the conceptualization. Furthermore, the term "occupational education" seems preferable to the overly used, and often misused, terms "vocational," "technical" or "vocational-technical."

As we proceed, I will also be referring to "higher education" in a manner which, among some educators, is still a bit unique, and perhaps somewhat abhorrent. Nevertheless, I will later argue that "higher education" can and should be conceived to include all institutionally structured educational experiences offered to post-secondary school-

age individuals. Therefore, the full range of occupational education experiences can and should be considered worthy undertakings for institutions of higher education such as community colleges. It is increasingly clear that the awarding of a degree can no longer be the primary factor which determines whether programs or institutions are to be considered "higher education."

Let us now turn briefly to the term "accountability." The most constructive definition of this concept stresses the elements of overall quality in higher education and not the narrow views of austerity and restraint held by some today. First and foremost, accountability is the effective and efficient attainment of worthwhile educational outcomes that are reflected in the behavior of students. Accountable institutions use human and material resources wisely in providing an environment which fosters demonstrable educational growth and development of virtually all students they purport to serve. They also provide a meaningful accounting of their stewardship to all concerned, especially the various publics and the students.

The current concern in some quarters for costs and control of disruption in higher education are not unrelated to effectiveness and efficiency. However, they are not the central focus of legitimate accountability, which, in its best sense, is more than saving money or maintaining "good" order. On the other hand, higher education can no longer assume a sacrosanct position. More direct evidence of the complex "outcomes" of the educational processes must be sought by those within the institutions. Fundamental issues such as the clarification and communication of higher education goals, high institutional drop-out rates, poor course and program organization, and teaching

improvement must receive increasingly constructive attention if the current erosion of public support for higher education is to be reversed.

The newer accountability movement takes its impetus chiefly from a series of publics and students, for whom it is a collection of expectations or demands for improvements in education. In the area of occupational education, demands for such quality have been articulated in the past by governmental agencies through the process of state approval for funding of programs, and by special groups of occupational educators, themselves, through the requirement of licensure for practice in some areas, such as nursing. Some fields of occupational education have also been subject to programmatic accreditation scrutiny by appropriate educational specialists. The concerns enunciated through approval, licensure, and specialized accreditation have provided important controls in occupational education, but the programmatic nature of the approaches involved may not lend themselves to the types of <u>institutional</u> improvements now being demanded.

For many years the institutions of higher education, including those engaged in initiating occupational education programs, have supported and engaged in a form of self-improvement and self-imposed accountability or responsibility, namely, voluntary regional or institutional accreditation. Administered through higher education commissions in six associations encompassing the fifty states, the focus of this form of accreditation has been the effective and efficient operation of an institution's total efforts to achieve its avowed purposes.

The goals of institutional accreditation and the newer accountability movement are generally congruent. However, the legitimacy of accredita-

tion efforts to assist in the improvement of institutions rest with its ability to be responsive to changing conditions in higher education. It is with this in mind that it appears appropriate to now consider a summary of the progress which has been made by these accrediting commissions in relating their activities to one of the newer movements in higher education - occupational education. My focus on institutional accreditation is not intended to slight the importance of such other mechanisms as state approval and licensure, but rather to illustrate the accountability base which is developing in the occupational education area.

Accrediting Commission Progress

Institutional accreditation in the United States has evolved on a regional basis. The six associations, which initiated their activities at different times since 1900, historically focused on educational concerns peculiar to their respective regions. Most of the associations have established similar structures, that is, commissions to which they have delegated the actual responsibility for carrying on the accrediting activities in the secondary education and higher education fields. Variations in the association structures, such as the separate Junior College Commission in the Western Association, and the special commissions for occupational education in the New England and Southern Associations, reflect differences among the associations in historical development and in judgment as to how accrediting activities can be most adequately organized to serve the types of of institutions operated within each region.

Recently, the higher education commissions, recognizing the shift in emphasis from regional to national concerns in higher education, formed

the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education (FRACHE). Among the developmental efforts of this joint venture is the establishment of greater consistency of accreditation activities among the higher education commissions. The fact that the higher education commissions share the same basic philosophy provides a common basis for these further improvements.

All of the commissions are concerned with the quality of the total efforts of an institution to achieve its avowed purposes. Each commission, while defining its purview through general eligibility requirements, assists and considers for membership institutions possessing a diversity of characteristics and purposes. This means that, within each commission, institutional quality is not always defined in the same terms, but is defined in terms of the purposes the institution involved purports to serve. Operating on this principle, all of the commissions believe that two institutions, such as a community college and a liberal arts college, offering quite different programs, can both be adjudged to be of high quality, and, therefore, be accredited.

The concern of the higher education commissions for common improvements in accreditation is illustrated quite well in their increasing sensitivity to the area of occupational education. The history and experience of the commissions is most deeply rooted in the academic or liberal arts orientation in education. In the evaluation of community colleges, for example, the transfer program received the most emphasis until relatively recently. However, the commissions are now demonstrating broader concerns. As a reflection of this fact they recently cooperated in sponsoring a study of current activities of institutional accrediting associations as they relate

to institutions which offer occupational education.[1] Certain outcomes of this study as well as the subsequent on-going discussions within and among the commissions are pertinent to the community college field.

A. Communication

The commissions are well along in the process of recognizing and acting upon the need for greater mutual understanding and communication between the accrediting and occupational education communities. Increasing contacts and extended discussions with state vocational directors, the establishment of special study committees composed largely of occupational educators, and the sponsoring of and participation in occupational education conferences are some of the actions taken by the commissions in response to this need. These efforts are aimed not only at breaking down the unfortunate past "separation" of occupational education and general education, but also the clarification of such issues as the curricular philosophies of occupational education and the target clienteles which can be most appropriately served by such experiences.

B. Expectations

Operationally, institutions offering occupational education wishing to be considered for accreditation must follow the normal procedure of seeking this status through a process involving both self analysis as well as on-site evaluation by a team of visitors assigned by the appropriate accrediting commission. The expectations applied

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1"Institutional Accreditation As It Relates To Occupational Education: A Status Report," sponsored by the Federation of Regional Accrediting Commissions of Higher Education, with the cooperation of the Council of Regional Secondary School Accrediting Commissions, 1970

in this evaluative process are variously labeled standards, guidelines, or policies by the commissions and take the form of objective norms and principles of good practice as:

> The collection of learning resources should accurately reflect the needs of the institution as defined by its educational tasks and should grow in a manner consistent with the growth and development of the institution's several programs.

While established general expectations provide the basic framework for the accrediting activity of the commissions, appropriate interpretations are necessary as they relate to the purposes of individual institutions. Such special interpretations sometimes take the form of actual revisions of the published statements of expectations. In general, it appears that a number of the commissions are finding it necessary and desirable to alter their statements of evaluative expectations in some way to make them more applicable to occupational education. The development and pilot testing of such special guidelines for occupational education has been underway over the past two years in at least four (4) of the commissions. In addition, an effort is being initiated by the Federation of Regional Commissions of Higher Education to develop an evaluative framework which places more emphasis on the educational processes and outcomes than upon structural factors of an institution. This latter project is aimed at improving institutional accrediting for all types of institutions, but would, because of the nature of occupational education, have obvious benefits in this area.

C. Decision-Making Bodies

The commissions were also queried regarding the representation of the occupational education viewpoint in their formal deliberations. All

of the commissions report that some members of their various formal decision-making bodies are individuals who hold administrative or teaching positions in institutions which offer occupational education. In addition, three of the higher education commissions indicate that individuals holding specific occupational education expertise also hold positions in their organizational structures.

D. Examining Teams

The on-site examination is the primary basis for the accreditation decision and the examining team is the most important element in the decision-making process leading to accreditation. Each commission establishes examining teams whose composition is intended to provide appropriate coverage of the significant programs and operations of the institution being visited. All of the commissions indicate their desire to provide coverage of occupational education through the on-site examination of institutions engaged in such efforts. However, since they are involved in total institutional accreditation, none of the commissions or special committees compose examining teams with the intent of evaluating each specific occupational education program by itself, but only as these programs relate to the total objective of the institution.

The specificity of expertise in occupational education represented on examining teams varies with each commission and the type of institution to be examined. Generally, the types of individuals selected include:

A. Institutional Generalist - Individuals who hold teaching or administrative positions in institutions which offer occupational education (e.g., community college president)

B. Occupational Education - Generalist — Individuals who hold expertise relative to the general area of occupational education or an area within occupational education (e.g., dean of occupational education or division chairman)

C. Occupational Education - Specialist — Individuals who hold expertise relative to a specific occupational education program (e.g., auto mechanics instructor)

Based on reports from the commissions, there is an increasing tendency to include the Occupational Education Generalist type of individual on examining teams which visit institutions with significant occupational education offerings. However, this practice appears to be an evolutionary development and some commissions also report that Institutional Generalists are often relied upon to make the necessary judgments regarding occupational education offerings in a total institutional evaluation.

E. Summary

None of the commissions currently report complete satisfaction with the adequacy of their activities relative to institutions offering occupational education. However, much progress has been made and more should be expected. Parenthetically, it should be noted that future developments will hopefully include work through the Federation (FRACHE) which will enable the commissions to more constructively articulate their activities with specialized accrediting agencies such as the National League for Nursing.

Based on the depth and breadth of experience in the accrediting efforts we have just considered, and the fact that much of it has involved working with community college developments, it is possible to isolate some major issues in occupational education as carried on by such institutions.

Issues in Occupational Education

The most important of these issues appears to involve the fundamental philosophy of occupational education and its implementation in the community college. Community colleges, with commitment to broad offerings and the "open door," represent higher education's concern for providing alternatives to the academic model, but old habits die hard and new images are not established overnight.

Not long ago, higher education addressed itself to a limited segment of the population. The academic model served reasonably well, and each level of education was judged by how well it prepared students for the next level of academic pursuit. However, our national commitment to universal post-secondary education and equality of opportunity, together with the demands of our ever increasingly technological society, dictate a broader base for higher education. Occupational education has the potential of meeting the new needs of society as well as the diverse needs of individuals, but it also has a past to overcome. Because of our historically narrow academic definition of higher education, occupational education has never been quite "academically respectable" nor have the students in it been considered "talented;" i.e., students take occupational courses not because of what they can do, but because of what they can't do. Unfortunately, many community college educators still appear to hold such negative views of occupational education. However trite it may sound, the building and internalizing of a strong, positively oriented, commitment to and understanding of occupational education must continue to be a major effort in the community college if real success is to be realized. Such an effort must include consideration of the full range of occupational education.

Within the past ten years, community colleges across the country have succeeded in developing and implementing over ten thousand highly technical programs designed to prepare individuals for semi-professional positions in areas related to agriculture, allied health, business, engineering and public service.[2] These programs undoubtedly meet certain individual and societal needs and should be expanded upon. However, too many community colleges seem to feel that such programs should be the extent of their role in occupational education. Furthermore, it is too often assumed that technical education represents a model of occupational education. It should be recognized that technical or para-professional education programs lie on a continuum (and not a single model) represented by the varying mix of theory and manipulative skill development necessary for the target occupation. The full range of occupational education includes the extension of the continuum to programs designed to prepare individuals for skilled-level programs.

Without any substantive evidence regarding additional unmet needs in their communities, many community colleges refuse to consider their possible role in offering short skilled-level oriented programs such as auto body repair or welding. Much of this reticence appears to rest on the fact that such programs, which rely most heavily on manipulative skill development, do not seem to be worthy of the efforts of an institution of "higher education." It is often argued that such offerings should be made by someone else such as

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2"Report of Occupational Education Programs in Community Junior Colleges," The Occupational Education Bulletin, American Association of Junior Colleges, Washington, D.C., March, 1971

the secondary schools, even though the secondary schools may exclude those beyond high school age from their programs.

Many community colleges which do offer skilled-level programs have never bothered to analyze the validity of their requirement of high school graduation or its equivalency for admission to the programs in terms of the demands and objectives of the programs. It is merely argued that this is a logical requirement for any program offered in a "college."

Many other community colleges which offer skilled-level programs artificially and unnecessarily lengthen the programs to two-years in order to award a degree for its completion and, therefore, make it more "respectable." Education respectability for occupational programs will not come from trying to define all such programs as associate degree programs.

We have a tendency, because quality is so often considered synonymous with sophistication and the length of a program, to dilute skill programs by adding extraneous courses which "someone thinks everybody ought to have," but which make very little observable contribution to the effectiveness with which the student applies his skills. Every person needs to broaden his vistas beyond his immediate job training to the limit of his interests and capabilities. However, this broadening effect should not be attempted at the expense of necessary skills. To be an integral part of a skills curriculum, support courses should be highly relative to the specific skill-objectives to be attained. Then, too, time is often a factor very much related to a student's economic needs and the longer he is kept

in a program, the longer it is before he can begin earning. Once a student is working and earning successfully, he can be interested far more easily in a broader education. Why should a program attempt to provide a total educational exposure for a student unless this is a specific program objective? It is as though we believe that this is the end of his formal education, and we will never have an opportunity to work with him again. A program should be flexible and attractive so that a student will find it profitable and stimulating to return for courses to satisfy the needs he may feel for a broader education as well as for more specialized education.

Goal-oriented curricular design experimentation is definitely needed in community college occupational education to establish the appropriate balance between skill development and support (or "general education") courses for particular program objectives. It seems obvious that many new courses in the latter area will need to be developed since the regular academic transfer courses are not normally designed for such purposes or clienteles. It is also obvious that groups, such as those involved in accrediting activities, can and will support such curricular thrust if they are rationally designed.

Another related issue in occupational education is the tendency of many community colleges to be pre-occupied with offering occupational education to full-time students or to students who are all presumed to be ready to start a program at a particular entry level and work through to the program's completion. It would seem that community colleges which are serious about their occupational education efforts would be prepared to attempt to accommodate students who:

1. need remediation in necessary prerequisites for the programs.
2. have prior experiences and skills which could enable them to start the programs at various entry levels.

3. desire only a few selected educational experiences from the programs to meet their immediate needs.

4. desire to make reasonable substitutions in their programs from other course offerings in the institution for which they appeared to have the necessary background and ability.

5. desire or need to attend the institution on a part-time basis, particularly at night.

6. need or desire to attend classes at times during the year other than those dictated by the regular semester or quarter calendar.

7. any combination of the above.

A further issue is related to the use of occupational education advisory committees representing appropriate business and industrial viewpoints. Some community colleges do not appear to utilize the imputs from such committees at all in program development, initiation or evaluation. Other institutions appear to be ready to have program requirements and design almost completely dictated by such committees. Further efforts in the use of these committees need to be made to establish the appropriate balance and sharing of ideas between educators and the business-industrial community. It can not be assumed that business and industry know exactly what they want in terms of employee preparation any more than educators can be expected to be completely attuned to the needs of changing technology.

Finally, we need to consider the implications of the evolving "ladder concept" in occupational education. There is an increasing need to provide some open-endedness to occupational education preparation. Establishing programs which are rigidly "terminal" is no longer defensible (if it ever was) in the minds of students, business and industry, and leading educators. Bold experiments in areas such as

nursing education have proven that it is feasible for students prepared at one occupational level (e.g., practical nursing) to be given extensive recognition of that preparation in successfully pursuing a program at a higher level (e.g., associate degree nursing - R.N.).

Providing for upward articulation, or "transfer," of occupational education experiences does not involve trying to design all occupational programs for the transfer to baccalaureate degree academic programs. Nor does this movement imply that all students should be explicitly prepared for such upward educational tracking. It merely means that each occupational education program should be broad enough in design to enable students to enter or move on more freely should they so desire. This effort should, as it continues, make occupational education programs more attractive to students and improve the total development of the nation's manpower.

In presenting these selected issues relating to the philosophy of occupational education and its implementation in the community college, I have purposely chosen to appear rather critical as a means of stimulating your discussion. It is recognized that a vast number of community colleges in the country have made significant progress in the areas I have mentioned, as well as many others. However, it appears that much is yet to be done. Certainly, occupational education programs and the students who enroll in them today are an early taste of the demands that universal higher education will make on educational innovators. Certainly, a deep commitment to and continually updated understanding of this dynamic field, together with a great openness to reasoned experimentation will facilitate further improvements in occupational education.

In conclusion, I would be remiss if I failed to offer, at least, some remarks regarding another important issue area which relates to occupational education as well as higher education in general. The broad focus of this issue is the need for increased effort in institutional research, particularly in the areas of community needs and students. Outside pressures for accountability, and the increasing need to make rationally grounded decisions within institutions on such things as the use of limited resources, demands more information regarding the "outputs" of higher education than ever before. Fortunately, efforts along this line will be facilitated by expanding availability of increasingly sophisticated instruments and techniques for direct (or indirect) measurement of educational outcomes.

In occupational education, of course, follow-up of graduates in employment has been a rather common undertaking. Follow-up of enrollees who do not graduate has not been as common. Pre-post testing of occupational education students to assess changes in appropriate student's skills, knowledge, and values over time has also received little attention. Among other possibilities, techniques such as these should be seriously explored. However, data collection will be a waste of time unless efforts are made by the institutions involved to analyze and utilize such information in decision-making.

As I mentioned earlier in this presentation, efforts are now being initiated through FRACHE to establish an evaluative framework for accreditation which will place increasing emphasis on the evidence of an institution's educational outcomes. The evolution of this new accreditation thrust over the next few years will, I am sure,

act as a necessary stimulus for institutional emphasis on institutional research.

I hope that this compilation of brief observations has provided appropriate stimulus for your discussion. I will now welcome any questions or challenges to my remarks.

Thank you.

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